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## THE EVOLUTION OF MILTON'S POLITICAL THINKING

Milton is a child of his age. The first impression, however, is likely to be that his political principles were born full-fledged. It is true that by training and temperament he is naturally aligned with one party rather than another in the historic struggle that culminated in his time. But with the reservation necessary in dealing with a great and original genius we can say that he developed with the logic of events. In a marked degree the exigencies of the times determined what direction his native genius should take, and what interpretation and application he should give to the principles which he accepted.

The changes in his thinking are not due, however, to a systematic and logical development of principles previously entertained, but rather to the turn of events. We note little maturing in his political thought and still less the consistency that comes from a systematic development of principles antecedently held. He does not move in the sphere of speculative politics, as do Hobbes, Jean Bodin, and Locke, but he grounds his argument on broad reason and applies with grandeur the principle of freedom to each new question or crisis that he must face. The application that he makes to-day may be inconsistent with that of to-morrow, but not with that large freedom which with him was the central conviction of his life.

As every student of Milton points out, liberty is the magic word for him; not liberty for its own sake, however, but, in the phrase of Professor Seeley, "liberty as an energizing force", the liberty that sets a man free from a lower order by making him obedient to a still higher. Milton is almost alone among his contemporaries in his comprehensive grasp of the far-reaching consequences of the Puritan movement, and of what it would mean, not merely for the state and civil liberty, but for the liberation of genius, for literature, education, and religion. Beyond any Englishman of the seventeenth century he stands for free inquiry and the sanctity of the individual. He varied in the application of these principles with the shifting of events. He

is a moderate monarchy man in 1640; he is a defender of the commonwealth, although not averse to monarchy as a principle in 1649; he is a Republican by 1653; an Oliverian in 1655; the doctrinaire advocate of a sort of elective aristocracy in 1660.

While it is not our purpose to discuss the development of Milton's religious thinking, it will not be amiss to name the changes for the light they may throw upon his political thought and upon the way that his mind worked. He is a Puritan Conformist in 1639, as a majority of liberals are, at that time; a Presbyterian in 1641; an Independent by 1654; an Independent in 1658, but more insistent that the Establishment be destroyed; an Independent in 1673, but in a still different sense. But his political thinking was modified by the history of the Puritan struggle in a more certain and definite way than his religious opinions. His defence of Presbyterianism in *Reason in Church Government* was really only opportunism. Since Independency as a church policy was still in solution, Presbyterianism was the nearest system at hand that made for the liberty he loved. It changed into opposition when he saw the direction it was to take—that "New Presbyter was but Old Priest writ large".

Early in his career, as we would infer from entries and observations in the *Commonplace Book*, Milton was a moderate constitutionalist. There are quotations in this book bearing directly or indirectly upon political theory from more than thirty writers, ancient and modern. Here, as Gooch remarks, we discover the whole spirit of his political thinking, his conception of the State as an organism, his comprehensive view of national well-being, his reverence for the thinkers of antiquity, his sacrifice of the undistinguished multitude to the natural peers of mankind.<sup>1</sup> One has only to read his political pamphlets with this scrap-book in hand to note how indebted he is to this early reading.

There is nothing in this book, however, to suggest that Milton had passed beyond a liberal constitutionalism. While we would not look to his early church pamphlets for political theory, there

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<sup>1</sup> E. P. Gooch: *English Democratic Ideas in the Seventeenth Century*, pp. 177-8.

are several passages which make it clear that he had no quarrel with monarchy as such. In fact, he was proud of the English scheme of government.

“There is no civil government that hath been known more divinely and harmoniously tuned, more equally balanced, as it were, by the hand and scale of justice than is the commonwealth of England; where under a free and untutored monarch, the noblest, worthiest and most prudent men, with full approbation and suffrage of the people, have in their power the supreme and final determination of highest affairs.”<sup>2</sup>

And again in the same pamphlet he attempts to show that ecclesiastical supremacy in the hands of episcopacy “draws to it the power to excommunicate kings, and then follows the worst that can be imagined”.

In the pamphlets before 1649 there is little that has to do directly with Milton's political theories. They all evidence his supreme love of liberty, his sublime confidence in the triumph of truth, and his enthusiastic hopes for the future. In the *Arcopagitica* he sees England a “noble and puissant nation arousing herself like a strong man after sleep and shaking her invincible locks”. He declares that “Truth is strong next to the Almighty, she needs no policies, no stratagems, nor licensing to make her victorious”. In the address to Parliament prefixed to the first divorce tract we are reminded of the doctrinaire hopes of the philosophers of the French Revolution: “Parliament has now in its hand, doubtless by the favour of God, a great and populous nation to reform”. He fears “lest some other people more devout and wise bereave us of this offered immortal glory, our wonted prerogatives of being the first asserters in every great vindication”.<sup>3</sup> Milton feels that the time has come to initiate a new order of things. In this pamphlet he sets out to reform not merely political and intellectual theories, but customary morality. Customs and morals are no more fixed and final for Milton than philosophies, theologies or political theories.

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<sup>2</sup> *Of Reformation in England*. Bohn. Vol I, p. 408.

<sup>3</sup> Bohn. Vol. III, p. 118.

"Moralities must be revised from age to age by enlarged and progressive reason." He, with his contemporaries, forgets how infinitely complex human society is and what large part is played by prejudice, habit, custom; they forget that any present institution is the long deposit of experience, layer upon layer, as it were. They would do in a few years what we know in the light of sequent events needed centuries to accomplish. "This is the perennial tragedy of life", says Thomas Hill Green, "which comes of the inevitable conflict between the creative will of man and the hidden wisdom of the world which seems to thwart it."<sup>4</sup> Milton and the Puritans failed, at least of their immediate end, because, despite their inspiration, sincerity, enthusiasm, they did not understand the condition under which reform must come. They refused to come to terms with tradition, "with the habits, common feelings, interests, and prejudices which were deep rooted in the national character". Burke's warning that in discussing the rights of men we should not fail to study their natures would not have been amiss for Milton.

In this dawn when—

"It was bliss to be alive  
But to be young was very heaven,"

Milton had great confidence in Parliament and believed in the people. We shall see, however, that as events progressed his attitude toward both Parliament and the people changed, and his ardor dampened, although he remained a sublime idealist to the end.

A great change took place in the political thinking of England between the year of the publishing of the *Areopagitica* and Milton's next pamphlet. Let us note here that the first phase of the Puritan Revolution was directed against the church. Gooch says that two-thirds of the speeches and pamphlets between the meeting of the Long Parliament and the break with the King in 1642 dealt with questions of the church.<sup>5</sup> The most active opponent of the church was careful to explain that "no Bishop did not imply no King". Only after the war had begun and the

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<sup>4</sup> *Lecture on the English Commonwealth. Works*, Vol. III, p. 278.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 105.

army had been victorious did the anti-monarchic sentiment develop rapidly. Political radicalism was born in the army.

Before 1641 what was attempted was merely to curtail the royal prerogatives and to shift the general direction of the government from the King towards the House of Commons. The passage of the "Grand Remonstrance" showed that the attitude was changing; at this juncture conventional deference for the monarch was thrown off and Parliament appealed to the nation against the King. Only a month later Henry Parker, now a spokesman for the popular party in the Commons, maintained that God was no more the author of one form of government than another. All power is originally with the people, and God only confirms that which is selected by common consent. The charter of nature entitles the subjects of all countries to safety, and the community, by virtue of its paramount interest, may justly seize power and use it for its own preservation. We can thus see that the appeal to the ancient liberties of England, to use and wont, was giving way before the appeal to the Law of Nature and reason. This theoretical tendency was strengthened by the war party calling in, at this time, the aid of Scotland. The Scotch leaders were steeped in the political philosophy of Buchanan and Knox. Rutherford, their spokesman, claimed that all jurisdiction over men is artificial and positive.

"To choose a King is the same as to make a King. The King is subordinate, not co-ordinate—a creature of the people's making and can be unmade or as easily made. Nor can Parliament resist the people any more than they can the King."

In these intensely individualistic times there was a multiplication of theories; there were the Millenarians, Erastians, Antinomians, Levellers. The increasing terror of these threatening sections led the Presbyterians to sever their connection with the popular party or so-called Independents, and to attempt to work some compromise with the King. With the opposition of the Presbyterian party the theories of the Independents became even more radical. The army was the hotbed of radical and levelling doctrines. It rejected the idea of King entirely and maintained that Parliament is a creation of the people. It sent in a remon-

strance to the Long Parliament, demanding not only the election of a new Parliament but the abolition of Monarchy and the Peers. The struggle went on between the Army and the Parliament, ending only with the passage by the Commons on January 4, 1649, of three resolutions. The first resolved that the People were the original of all just power in the State; the second, that the Commons possessed supreme power as representatives of the People; the third, that whatever was enacted by them should have the force of law without needing the consent of either King or the House of Peers. England was Republican.

Even this cursory outline of events and opinion between 1644 and 1649 will help to explain, at least in a small way, that Milton's political thought as expressed in *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* developed with the course of events. In this tract we have a powerful and original mind, expressing, in a consistent body of doctrine and with force and eloquence, the Republican principles and theories that were current at the time,—not so radical as Lilburn or Goodwin, more republican than Ireton or Cromwell.

In the *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* Milton has attached himself to the Republic and has taken up the cause of the regicides; he has become the champion of the theory of Natural Rights and Social Contract.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The spirit of free inquiry in the sixteenth century opened up to discussion such questions as the social contract, divine right of kings and sovereignty of the people. The notion of social contract can be found already in Plato (*Crito*, 49-52; *Republic*, II, 359,). The same theory, together with the doctrine of the sovereignty of the people, runs down through the Middle Ages and stands as a justification of popular revolt against tyrant pope or tyrant king. The doctrine of the sovereignty of the people had been inherited from the Christian tradition. Christianity had emphasized the worth of the humblest soul and taught the brotherhood of man. For the Middle Ages both king and pope were only servants instituted by a sovereign people. Even Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologiæ*, supports this doctrine. The law of God comes before the Pope. With the breaking up of the mediæval empire and the growth of the modern State, with the struggle between Church and State, the king comes to claim absolute right. In fact, the early reformers, Luther and Calvin, defend the divine rights of kings as against popes. Early in the Reformation, however, the sovereignty of the

"No man can be so stupid [he says] as to deny that all men naturally were born free . . . they agreed by common league to bind each other from mutual injury. All authority was originally unitedly in them all; for peace, for order and lest each man should be his own partial judge, they communicated and derived either to one, whom for the eminence of his wisdom and integrity they chose above the rest: or to more than one, whom they thought of equal deserving; the first was called king, the other magistrate."

From these premises it is clear that the power remains with the people and cannot be taken from them without a violation of their birthright. The power of kings, then, is only derivative, committed to them in trust, and in consequence the "people as often as they shall judge best can either choose or reject them, retain them or depose them, by the liberty and right of free-born men to be governed as seems best". "It is their right to depose a king, their duty to depose a tyrant." With buoyant enthusiasm and with little consciousness of the need of comparing his theories with practice, which, as Burke remarked, "is the true touchstone of all theories which regard man and the affairs of men", he asserts:—

"Wanting that power to remove or abolish any governor or subordinate, with the government itself upon urgent causes, and to depose and economize in the land which God hath given them, as master of family in their own house and free inheritance, we are indeed under tyranny and servitude."

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people and the doctrine of the social contract were reasserted. Two forms of the original pact or contract are to be noted in the post-Reformation period: the first, the Biblical and mediæval form, surviving from the Middle Ages, was seemingly based on the Hebrew idea of a covenant between man and God, supplemented by the Roman idea of contract; the second related to the institution of a political society by means of a compact among individuals, and is set forth in the works of Hooker, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. These two are confused in Buchanan's *De Jure Apud Scotos*, in the *Vindiciæ Contra Tyrannos*, in Hotman's *Francia Gallia*, as well as in the pamphlets of Milton. The divine and the human, the natural and supernatural, had not yet been disentangled. The Commonplace Book of Milton evidences that he was thoroughly acquainted with these great political theorists of the Renaissance, as well as with those of antiquity and the Middle Ages. There are allusions, quotations, illustrations and arguments from them in all of his political pamphlets.



In his insistence that the people are the original power, and that they retain more than they give, Milton separates himself from Hobbes and becomes identified with the liberal school. He also separates himself from such men as Ireton, who was the defender of expediency and believed that rights are not born *in vacua* but only in the concrete situation of an actual society. Yet we find nothing in the tract to attest that he hated monarchy itself. He was only "showing in abstract consideration of the question that might lawfully be done against tyrants".

In this tract Milton sees the divine origin of men; freedom as their birthright, power to choose their own King, mastery in their own house and free inheritance. Disillusionment is beginning to come even in the next tract, *Eikonoklastes*. The people now are irrational, the hapless herd, or how else be so enchanted by this device of the King—the *Eikon Basilike*! His references to the King are here becoming bitter. By the time of his *Defence of the People of England* against Salmasius, monarchy itself has become contrary to the Law of Nature. Nature appoints that wise men should govern fools, not that the wicked should rule over the good; and consequently they that take government out of such men's hands act according to the Law of Nature. Nobody has the right to be king unless he excels all others in wisdom.<sup>7</sup> Milton has passed over to republicanism. And I might point out here a peculiar feature in so great a mind as Milton's. His break with monarchy is seemingly not a result of speculation in the closet, but of personal antagonism. It needed the bitter personal feeling aroused by the answering of the *Eikon Basilike* and Salmasius to carry him over to the completest republicanism.

In the *Second Defence* of two years later he is still an Oliverian, although the Commonwealth has passed over into a Protectorate. We have noticed that Milton's estimate of the wisdom of the people lessened after 1649. He has no longer such radiant hopes for Parliament as he had in 1643, and, despite his belief in the sanctity of the people, his little faith in representative government is weakening. In the latter part of the *Second*

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<sup>7</sup> *A Defence of the People of England*, chs. 5, 6, 7, 8.

*Defence* he violently attacks current democracy with its shibboleths and catchwords. For—

“who would vindicate your right of unrestrained suffrage or of choosing what representative you likest best merely that you might elect the creature of your own faction? . . . Who could believe that the master and the patrons of banditti could be the proper guardian of liberty? or who would suppose that he should ever be made one hair more free by such a set of public functionaries when, . . . among them, who are the very guardians of liberty, and to whose custody it is committed, there must be so many who do not know either how to use or to enjoy liberty?”<sup>s</sup>

There are signs of disappointment and disillusionment in the following statement, and a feeling that he is defending a lost cause. Speaking of England's mighty accomplishments for liberty, at the very close of the *Second Defence*, he declares:—

“I have delivered my testimony, I would almost say have erected a monument that will not readily be destroyed, to the reality of these singular and mighty achievements which were above all praise . . . . If after such a display of courage and vigor, you basely relinquish the path of virtue, if you do anything unworthy of yourselves, posterity will sit in judgment on your conduct.”

I said he was an Oliverian, but his praise of Cromwell in the *Second Defence*, as glowing as it is, is not unqualified. He no doubt prefers the rule and system of Cromwell as a whole to those of his opponents, but nevertheless says to him:—

“Reflect often what a dear thing and of how dear a parentage this liberty is that has been commended and entrusted to you by your country. . . . Truly you cannot yourself be free without us, for it is an arrangement of nature that whoever intrenches upon the liberty of others loses his own, first of all.”

It is the liberty, not of constitutionalists, that he would have Cromwell respect, but rather the liberty that allows the government of the community to be carried on by all its worthiest members and that gives the most energizing rational liberty

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<sup>s</sup>*Second Defence of the English People.* See pp. 297-298.

to the individual. He tells Cromwell that he should avail himself of the counsel of the best men of the time. He advises him that he would do well to trust the protection of our liberties to those men whose talents are so splendid and whose worth has been so thoroughly tried. He also suggests that the state should rid itself of the church establishment, and that there should be better provision for the education and moral training of the youth, reserving the rewards for the meritorious only; that those should be watched who itch to pass a multiplicity of laws, for laws are generally worse in proportion to their number, restricting liberty, rather than guarding against fraud.

Milton always fears any machinery or movement that would seem to cramp genius and limit freedom, not freedom that is license, but freedom that opens the largest possibilities for the fullest development of the individual powers.

There may be a despondency showing through in the *Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Commonwealth*, and a certain superhuman daring, even more marked, as the dangers are great or the cause hopeless, yet I think we can say that in this pamphlet we have reached a new stage in Milton's political thinking. He is no longer an Oliverian looking back longingly to the days of the Protectorate. Government by a single man is not to be thought of.

"That people needs must be mad or strangely infatuated that builds the chief hopes of their common happiness and safety on a single person. . . . All ingenious and knowing men will agree with me that a free commonwealth without a single person or House of Lords is by far the best government and again, the sovereign has little but to set pompous lace upon the superficial acting of the State."

Milton is more doctrinaire and more bold in this pamphlet than in any heretofore. Where he repeats his former opinions it is without qualifications. He says that men are—

"not bound by any statute of preceding parliaments, but by the law of nature only, which is the only law of laws truly and properly, to all mankind fundamental; the beginning and end of all government; to which no parliament or people that will thoroughly reform but may and must have recourse."

This sounds like the Social Contract and might have been uttered by Rousseau, Godwin or Paine. What are this law of nature and these natural rights, your practical statesman would ask? Milton fails here, seemingly, to see that our present institutions are the product of a long and painful evolution, that society, in the words of Burke, is a "partnership in every virtue and in all perfection, and as the end of such partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born". If Milton had known human nature and better appreciated what Emerson calls "the constant mind of man", he would have seen that reform comes slowly; that only through long reaches of time do principles and theories become a part of the living texture of society.<sup>9</sup>

Again we are forced to observe that the changes which take place in Milton's thinking are only those forced by the immediate circumstances. As stated above, the exigencies of the time do not seem to drive Milton to a far-reaching questioning and revising of his former theories, nor can we say that they brought him to a closer study of human nature as it is, and a better alignment with reality and the nature of things. Men, much inferior in power of mind and speculation, could separate themselves from their age and reflect upon it in a much broader way; they could return upon themselves, as Matthew Arnold said of Burke, see the opposite side of the question and note wherein they may have failed. Jeremy Taylor could; so could Richard Baxter. We can say of Milton, as of another great Englishman, that he touched nothing that he did not exalt and light up by great principles; yet what great man other than Carlyle was so impracticable in his concrete suggestions and had so little influence on the solution of current issues as Milton?

When one scheme fails Milton suggests another even more impracticable. What suggestion, considering the circumstances

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<sup>9</sup>Harrington, the author of *Oceana* and the moving spirit of the "Rota Club", was almost alone among the political philosophers of Milton's age in understanding the organic nature of society and the conditions of society that determine the nature of government.

and temper of the time, is more chimerical than the scheme he proposed for establishing a free commonwealth?

By March or April, 1659, when the pamphlet in question came out, all was chaos and everything looked toward the recalling of the House of Stuart. Milton, no doubt, had his fears but he will make at least one last effort. We can save the state yet if reason and courage remain in England. His scheme is not that of any of the contending parties of the time. He would have no single person ruling nor a House of Peers. "Writs are now sent out", he says, "for a now election, not in the name of a King, but in the name of the keepers of our liberty." Never was there such an opportunity for the convoking of a free Parliament, not by a king but by the voice of liberty. The ground and basis of every just and free government is a general council of ablest men chosen by the people. Milton believes in the remnant. Nothing could be settled by majorities:—

"Licentious and unbridled democracy ruins itself with its own excessive powers. . . . More just it is, if it come to force, that a less number compel a greater to retain what can be no wrong to their liberty, than that a greater number for the pleasure of their baseness compel the less most injuriously to be their fellow slaves. They who seek nothing but their own just liberty have always right to win it and keep it whenever they have power, be the voices ever so numerous that oppose it."

Milton distrusts Parliament, for they unsettle rather than settle a free government, breed commotion, changes, novelties and uncertainties.

By careful control of election and careful sifting of those elected, the worthiest shall be secured, who may rightly be called the true keepers of our liberty. As human nature runs, this would seem to subvert the very freedom that Milton would establish. Would not his schemes end in a slavery greater than that against which he fought so zealously in the past? Beyond any of his contemporaries he saw the scope of the revolution and the glory of an era of really free men. And in the *Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Commonwealth* we have the drowning man grasping at the straw. It was the contrast of the unique opportunity

that had arrived for the whole human race to take a step forward toward a higher civilization with the unripeness of the great mass of his fellow-men for such transition that Milton beheld. It was a situation as old and as abiding as the progressive spirit of man. How many persons of light and leading have all but despaired at the 'unteachableness' of the human race after the bitter experiences of the late war, and at their hesitation to take a step forward toward more amicable international relations! And I may add that Milton is not unlike many another idealist who starts on his career of reform with roseate hopes only to be disillusioned, and often to become in the end bitter and autocratic. It is the strong man of vision seeing great possibilities for the race, but who, on discovering that they are blind to all he beholds, is tempted to establish by force his kingdom of values. Milton could have said with Socrates, who, when told by Glaucon that the city he had been describing did not exist anywhere on earth, that it was an idea only, replied:—

"In heaven there is laid up a pattern of such a city, and he who desires, may behold that pattern, and beholding it, govern himself accordingly. But whether there is, or ever will be such a city, is of no importance to him, for he will act according to the laws of that ideal city and no other." <sup>10</sup>

Milton began as a moderate monarchy man; he became a republican, an Oliverian; he ended in advocating what we might call the rule of the natural aristocracy; but through all the changes there shines forth a large love of liberty, liberty as an energizing force, as a higher efficiency,—the liberty that will enable man to live according to the laws of that ideal city, and no other.

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<sup>10</sup> *The Republic*, Book IX.